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Angels and Gargoyles of Loboc Church

RENE JAVELLANA, S.J.

Loboc, one of Bohol's inland towns, located some twenty-three kilometers east of Tagbilaran, along the highway that leads to Carmen and the famed Chocolate Hills, prides itself as being the music-making town of Bohol. The distinction is well deserved. The Music Foundation of Loboc holds office at the ground floor of the three story *convento* built by the Recollects during the middle of the nineteenth century. A distinctive pealing of bells can summon anyone of the dozen or so brass bands that play at Loboc's important affairs, civic or religious. Loboc can also pride itself on being one of the oldest Christian settlements of Bohol, second only to Baclayon, some sixteen kilometers away along the seashore.

LOBOC'S CHRISTIAN BEGINNINGS

The tale of Loboc's Christian beginnings is narrated for us by the Jesuit chronicler, Pedro Chirino, and retold in De la Costa's *Jesuits in the Philippines, 1581-1768*.[1] The story may be summarized as follows: After the first mission superior, Antonio Sedeno, had accepted the care of the islands of Leyte and Samar in 1595, a request was forwarded to the Jesuits by Doña Catalina de Bolanos, the mother of Pedro de Gamboa, the proprietary governor of Bohol, requesting that the Society of Jesus open a mission station in the governor's encomienda in Bohol. Bohol was a densely populated island, with its population placed at 10,000—a very large number at that time. A number of Boholanos

1. Pedro Chirino, *Relacion de las Islas Filipinas*, trans. Ramon Ecchevaria (Manila: Filipiniana Book Club, 1969), pp. 86-87, 92-94, 325-26, 332-34; Horacio de la Costa, *Jesuits in the Philippines, 1581- 1768* (Cambridge, Massachusettes: Harvard University Press, 1961), pp. 164-65.

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were already Christians, since the Spaniards had made contact with the islands some thirty years previously. Miguel de Legaspi had landed on the island's shore in 1565, and made a blood compact with the chieftain of a place called Bo-ol. The chieftain was Katunau (Sikatuna).

Bohol was a prosperous island even before the Spaniards came. Its wealth came from trade, as the archaeological finds in Panglao Island off Tagbilaran attest.[2] Since its population was numerous, prosperous and friendly with the Spaniards, Bohol was ripe for a full scale campaign of evangelization. Sedeno sent Frs. Juan de Torres and Gabriel Sanchez on this mission. In 17 November 1596, the Fathers began the mission of Bohol. They established a station in Baclayon, then Torres moved to Loboc, an inland market village, along the Loay river, where highlanders exchanged with the lowlanders products of the forests for the riches of the sea. The people of Loboc were suspicious of Torres, but he allayed their suspicions by generously giving gifts like knives, needles, and scissors. While dispensing his store, he talked to the people and gradually explained that he had come from far away "to teach them matters of great importance concerning God, which would be of much advantage to them in life and after death." Having made friends with the Boholanos of Loboc, Torres explained that he wanted a church built and suggested that the people bring together their scattered barangays into a town. The people promised that they would build a church, and the very next day began to fell logs for it. The Boholanos, true to their word, settled together to form the town of Loboc from eleven dispersed barangays. Having founded Loboc, Torres moved on to Talibon, a gold mining town, some five or six days journey along the coast.

By 1602, Loboc may have been a stable parish. Redondo in his survey of the Diocese of Cebu in 1884, writes that the oldest parish

2. While gathering data for this essay in Bohol, in November 1984, I had the opportunity of meeting the Hon. Rolando Butalid, governor of Bohol, and his wife. Mrs. Butalid showed me some trade pottery dug up in the sitio of Bo-ol and in adjacent Panglao island. Panglao stands opposite Tagbilaran and is separated from it by a shallow and narrow strait. Today, two causeways link Panglao and Tagbilaran: one built during the nineteenth century and the other in recent times.

Emmanuel Mercado did the photography. Richard Chu helped in gathering data. Wilfredo Kasilag did the architectural sketch.

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books of Loboc are dated to the year 1602.[3] Around this time we read of the Seminario de los Indios. This has been misconstrued as a novitiate or as a seminary in the modern sense. However, the seminary was no more than a boarding school for training young boys in the rudiments of the faith and of the cultured life.[4] We suppose that during these early years of evangelization, the church of Loboc was no more than a nipa and bamboo structure, as was the seminary.

Although Baclayon was established earlier than Loboc, by the seventeenth century, Loboc became the residence of the Jesuit superior of the Bohol mission which by then counted Dauis and Panglao under its care.[5] The reason that Loboc should be chosen as central residence over the more senior Baclayon can be easily surmised. The shores of Bohol are ringed with watchtowers. Baclayon itself has a defensive wall. All these were protection against the raiders from the south who periodically swept through the Visayas and ravaged the Christian settlements. Loboc, located inland, was probably considered a safer place and strategically easier to defend. Hence, the mission superior lived here.

In 1621-22, the *Diwata* rebellion swept through Bohol. Almost all the Jesuit Fathers were in Cebu for the celebration of the beatification of Francis Xavier held in December 1621. During the absence of the Fathers it was rumored that a Diwata was seen roaming the mountains of Bohol. An oracle of the Diwata had promised the people that they would have prosperity and plenty, without the need for work or tribute, if they would abandon the religion of the Spaniards. The shamans who had lost their influence over the people with the coming of missionaries exhorted the people to abandon the towns and head for the hills. Loboc and Baclayon of the Christian settlements did not join the rebellion.[6]

3. An inscription of unknown date scribbled on the wall of the third story of the Loboc convento reads "kining simbahan gibarog tuig 1602" [This church was built 1602.] This same year is reckoned as the foundation of the Loboc parish. [See *1983 Catholic Directory of the Philippines* (Manila: CBCP, 1983), p. 500]. Also see Felipe Redondo y Sendino, *Breve resena de lo que es la diocesis de Cebu en las Islas Filipinas* (Manila: Establicimiento Tipografico del Colegio de Sto. Tomas, 1886), p. 187. 1602 may be the date of the canonical erection of the parish but 1602 is certainly too early a date for the building of the present day church of Loboc.

4. De la Costa, *Jesuits*, p. 312.

5. Although Talibon was not raised to the status of parish until 1722 or 1724, the Jesuits were already there by the end of the sixteenth century. Talibon like Inabanga on the Northern coast of Bohol was served by Jesuits residing in Cebu. Dauis was founded 1697, Panglao though raised to a parish in 1782 had a stone church earlier than this date. By the suppression in 1768, Jesuits were in Jagna (founded 1631), Loon (founded 1753), Tagbilaran and Maribojoc (both founded 1767), and Loay which, though founded as a parish in 1799, was a dependency of Loboc during the Jesuit era.

6. De la Costa, *Jesuits*, p. 315.

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In the 1630s, the saintly priest Alonso de Humanes was active in Loboc. When he died on 26 August 1633, his body was interred beneath one of the side altars of the Loboc church. Humanes' fame spread throughout the Visayas, since miracles attributed to his intercession could be obtained by those who prayed at his tomb. Loboc church therefore became a pilgrimage site.[7] In 1638, a conflagration swept through the Loboc church but stopped short of the altar underneath which Humanes was buried. This event was interpreted as miraculous. The fire, far from diminishing the prominence of Loboc, only served to make the pilgrimage site even more famous.[8]

Another saintly person who stayed for a while in Loboc was Juan de Ballesteros. Although he was not then a Jesuit, becoming one only later in his life, Ballesteros worked actively in the Jesuit missions of the Visayas, as a *donado* or lay volunteer. He was a factotum, serving the Fathers as pilot, carpenter, gardener, and teacher of song and dance to the people. Upon hearing of Ballesteros' fame, the Jesuit provincial superior Valerio de Ledesma admitted him as a Jesuit lay brother on 26 April 1620. Ballesteros went to Manila for his novitiate but pronounced his vows in Loboc in 15 August two years later.[9]

THE PRESENT CHURCH OF LOBOC

The date when the present church of Loboc was built is problematic. Certainly it was not built in 1602, as oral tradition in Loboc claims. If there was a church in 1602 this would have been destroyed in the fire of 1638. Redondo gives the cautious date "after 1638," taking his cue from Murillo Velarde's account of the fire previously mentioned. Repetti says around 1670, while De la Costa, says 1734. We hold to the later date given by De la Costa, but more on that later.[10]

The church of Loboc, as we have it today, is built of limestone rock, quarried out of coral gardens. Like many Visayan churches built of this material, its white to whitish cream color and irregular pockmarks give an excitement to surfaces. Responsive to light changes, Loboc gleams a glaring white at noon, and glows amber or reddish at sunset.

7. Pedro Murillo-Velarde, *Historia de la provincia de Filipinas de la Compania de Jesus* (Manila: Imprenta de la Compania, 1749), p. 68.
8. Ibid., p. 67.
9. Ibid.
10. Redondo, *Breve resena*, footnote no. 1, p. 187.

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Cruciform, the church has a long but narrow central nave, about 61 x 14.5 meters. Its layout is reminiscent of Baclayon which is also long and narrow (73.5 x 16.7 meters). Behind the apse is a 14 x 14.5 meter sacristy. Above this sacristy, accessible through a flight of stairs, is an empty room.

On 1 November 1768, the Recollects took charge of the Jesuit missions in Bohol which had been abandoned in May of that year because of the order of suppression issued by the King of Spain. Repetti attributes the octagonal belltower of four stories built some thirty meters away from the church to the initiative of the first Recollect pastor of Loboc.[11]

The Recollects added a convento to the rear of the church and connected this to the room above the sacristy by a covered bridge. The convento was probably built around 1854. Certainly it was functional by 1876, for Redondo reports that during the devastating flood of November of that year some four hundred people escaped dryshod because they sought refuge in the second story of this capacious convento.[12]

Around 1858, Fray Aquilino Bon added a portico to the Jesuit built church and raised a mortuary chapel at the Gospel flank of the church opposite the bell tower.[13] (Plate 1)

The church as it came from Jesuit hands was not heavily buttressed, so that around 1884, Fray Jose Sanchez and his successors added buttresses.[14] The reason for this architectural maneuver might be guessed at. The church is some twenty meters away from the Loay River. On 16 November 1876, the Loay River overflowed its banks. A devastating flood innundated the church, stopping short only at the level of the niche of the Lady of Guadalupe, Loboc's secondary patron.[15] Even today, the river floods annually around November. This periodic innundation, which caused no small damage to the church, weakened its

11. Archives of the Philippine Province [APP], "Miscellaneous jottings of Fr. Repetti," III-3-1614-1768.

12. A stone plaque in the sacristy wall reads 1854. The date could not refer to the building of the sacristy itself since the fabric of the church comes from the Jesuit era. Could the date refer to the completion of the convento which is opposite the sacristy?

13. APP, Repetti.

14. Ibid.

15. Devastating floods were recorded for the years 1876, 1947, and 1955, all in the months of November. In 1969, the floor of the church was raised by 0.70 meters thus hiding the original pavement. The flood of 1876 is immortalized in a ceiling painting in the church done by Max Aya-ay in 1930.

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foundation so that today we detect some sinking of the church, especially at its Gospel flank. For fear of destruction, the Recollects, who are noted for their fortified churches in the Palawan region, introduced heavy buttressing. (Plate 1)

The Recollects' salvaging maneuver was mostly a blessing but it was also a curse. It was a blessing since it saved the church, but a curse since the renovations hid some of the outstanding decorative features of the church and its facade.

To see the Jesuit-built facade, we have to go behind the Recollect portico. The facade follows the pattern of the church of San Ignacio in Intramuros, designed by the Jesuit Gianantonio Campioni and completed in 1632.[16] The two story facade is capped by a triangular pediment. Its vertical sweep is defined by columns and pilasters; its horizontal divisions by mouldings. But the resemblance ends there. The Loboc facade is flanked by two narrow octagonal towers one of which houses a stairwell. The pilasters and columns belong to no recognizable classical order or are fanciful renditions of them.

Entrance to the church is through a lintel and post doorway, flanked by huge engaged columns whose bases are now covered by a ramp built in 1969. These columns end in capitals that resemble chalice cups.

Like the San Ignacio facade, the lower story has niches flanked by pilasters on either side of the doorway. The niches are elaborately carved works, each one resembling a shell resting on a body alternately ribbed and gouged out. Floral designs trace its rim, and the Papal tiara completes each niche's design. The pilasters are of two types. One uses a grooved design and ends in Corinthianesque capitals. The other appears like a series of medallions tied together by a ribbon. We can hardly discern what are carved onto these medallions, though the outline of a Roman soldier and a bearded saint can be traced in some. This second type of pilaster cannot be identified with any known type. Though reminiscent of the Mexican *estipite,*[17] the pilasters taper at the top rather than at the bottom, thus inverting the pattern set by the

16. There were two San Ignacio churches built by the Jesuits in Intramuros. The first one built during the seventeenth century stood on a lot now occupied by the Pamantasan ng Maynila. The second San Ignacio, completed in 1889, was at Arsobispado street near the Manila Cathedral. Nothing remains of the seventeenth century church ruined by the earthquake of 1852 and subsequently quarried of its stones by Manileños. The second San Ignacio, now an empty shell bereft of its celebrated woodwork, was gutted by fire just before the liberation of Manila, and subsequently destroyed by bombs.

17. A type of column, developed in Mexico during its colonial period, characterized by heavy floral decoration.

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prototype. What decorations filled the second story of the facade is difficult to determine since much detail has been destroyed or covered over with cement.

There is no obvious function for the octagonal towers flanking the facade, except that of stairwell. They are too short for belltowers and too cramped. At the towers' exteriors, scrolls reminiscent of motifs found in *retablos* lead up to the second story and garlands cascade downward. All in all, the decorations on the Jesuit-built facade give it the appearance of an oversized retablo.

The rear wall of Loboc is no less impressive than the facade. We might in fact conceive of it as another facade. Above the lintel of the portal leading to the sacristy, twin ladies in flowing robes and wearing feathered bonnets support a medallion bearing a wooden bas relief of St. Ignatius. A trace of gesso, a touch of goldleaf and of paint hint at the lost *incarna* of the relief.[18] But the rear wall's intriguing decor is kept from view. Through a rickety flight of stairs that leads to the bridge connecting the nineteenth century convento with the church, we can come close to the dividing line between rear wall and pediment. Here, grotesque masks, half human, half animal, scowl at us. The masks are carved onto the corbels that may have supported the ceiling of the ancient church. Now that ceiling is gone.[19]

Loboc has two more unusual treasures that point to the Jesuit era. In the sacristy, above the lintel, is a bas relief, almost obliterated, that may have depicted St. Ignatius and his companions kneeling in front of the Madonna. Behind the nineteenth century main altar of Our Lady of Guadalupe are bas reliefs of colored *agramasa* depicting Sts. Ignatius and Francis Xavier, possibly the only one of its kind in the Philippines.[20]

ANGELS IN STAGES OF BECOMING

Using documentary evidence we have concluded that the main body of the Loboc church (nave, transept and sacristy) can be traced back to

18. Incarna: gesso and paint finish. [More specifically, the term refers to the life-like finishing given wooden statues.]

19. Corbels are wood, stone, or metal brackets projecting from the side of a wall and serving to support a cornice, the spring of an arch, a balustrade, etc.

20. An agramasa is mortar, usually composed of lime, sand, and gravel, although it is said that unlikely materials like egg and tree sap, plant fiber, and shredded leather were thrown into the batch.

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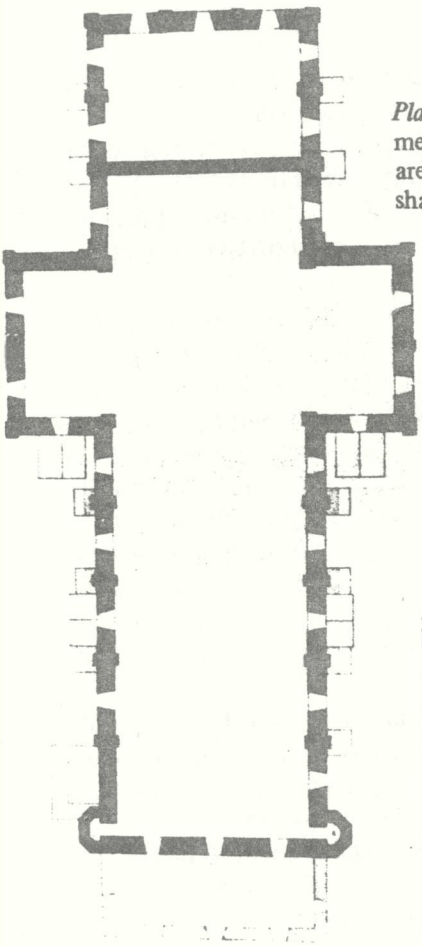

Plate 1. Floor plan of Loboc church based on measurements done on the spot. Later additions are cross-hatched. The Jesuit built portion are shaded black.

Plate 2. Cartouche in stages of carving. The Jesuit colophon is still missing.

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the Society of Jesus. We have as yet been unable to establish when this main body was built. We might approximate an answer.

In order to face the question of fixing dates, we have to regard the church itself of Loboc as a "document" and to read in its fabric telltale signs of construction. Our key to posing 1734 as the more probable date of building lies in the unfinished state of the decorative carvings of the church. (Plate 2)

We see this most clearly when we compare the different cartouches and angels that decorate the pillars of the church exterior. Starting from the rear of the epistle flank of the church we find a cartouche bearing the colophon of the Society, IHS surmounted by a cross, all placed above three incised nails. Below this is an empty cartouche. As we progress toward the facade of the church less and less detail is found in the cartouches, such that very near the facade we have the mere outlines of the cartouches blocked out. The angels which decorate the lower jamb of every window, again show this tendency. Angels nearer the rear of the church are finished. Faces, feathery bonnets, wings are all discernable, but the angel nearest the facade has been merely blocked out.

We can detect at least three stages of carving: rough blocking out, incision of finer details, and the completed relief. The same process may be noted in the medallions sculpted at the facade. Only one set seems to have been finished. The rest are in rough blocks.

The decorative carvings alone of the rear facade seem to have been finished. We can almost visualize the process of decoration. After rough blocking, work commenced at the facade and rear wall. Two sets of stonecarvers may have worked on the church. One set started at the rear and moved toward the facade, while another started with the facade. Because the designs at the facade were more involved, the stonecarvers spent more time shaping the soft and porous limestone blocks here than their counterparts at the rear.

The carvings are unfinished. Work on them seems to have stopped all of a sudden. What cataclysmic event triggered this? Could the stonemasons have died, without passing on their knowledge to able disciples? Did the town run out of funds? Or was the church still in the process of decoration when the Jesuits were expelled from Bohol, leaving Loboc without a priest for almost half a year?

Whatever the explanation for the sudden cessation of work on this architectural enterprise, the unfinished state of Loboc's cartouches and angels indicates that it is most unlikely that the present church would have been built during the seventeenth century, as Redondo suggests.

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If, as we have pointed out, Loboc was a pilgrimage church and the central residence of the Bohol mission, would its church be left unfinished for more than 100 years? Certainly, the church would have been better funded than the rest of the Bohol churches. And certainly, devotees would not leave unfinished a church that housed the remains of one reputed to be a saint.

More likely, what had happened is that after the fire of 1638, the church of Loboc was rebuilt again, but during the eighteenth century a bigger and more sumptuous church was raised to accomodate the pilgrims who came to this place. The church was still in the process of decoration when the decree suppressing the Society arrived in 1768.

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